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SUBJECT: AFRICAN MIGRANTS IN MOROCCO: ON THE EDGE OF
EL DORADO

REF: Algiers 00463, RABAT 00435

SUMMARY AND INTRODUCTION

¶1. (SBU) Every year thousands of sub-Saharan migrants enter eastern Morocco from Algeria intent on making the final push to Spain. While some are successful, many more end up languishing in the transit towns or settling into longer term residence in Morocco. Poloff visited the camps of clandestine migrants living in the forests of northeastern Morocco near the Algerian border and heard first hand stories of their migration and treatment by the authorities.

¶2. (SBU) The Government of Morocco (GOM) has responded to the influx of sub-Saharan migrants largely by detaining and expelling them into the desert area bordering Algeria without supplies or protection. The migrants, some of whom reportedly die in this no man's land, often end up returning to Morocco on foot. The poor state of relations between Morocco and Algeria and the closed land border mean that the expelled migrants are caught in an impossible situation and frequently used as a political weapon.

¶3. (SBU) This message, the first in a two-part series, will look at the realities on the ground for migrants living in the eastern city of Oujda, the means and routes of migration, and the GOM's expulsion policy. A second message will examine the evolution of migration in Morocco, cooperation with European Union states, and the GOM's policies to stem the flow of clandestine migration.

MIGRANTS IN THE FOREST

¶4. (SBU) Oujda, situated just 14 kilometers from Algeria, is the principal border crossing and last stop for thousands of sub-Saharan migrants on the final leg of their overland journey to Europe. At the edge of the city limits is an open air garbage dump bordered on one side by the aptly named neighborhood of Masakeen (the unfortunate ones) and on the other an extensive forest of pine trees which

stretches for kilometers in all directions. The forest shelters nearly a thousand migrants waiting for the opportunity or money to have smugglers arrange their onward passage.

15. (SBU) The migrants live in destitute and crude conditions in the forests because they are within easy walking distance of the city and yet relatively safe from the reach of the Moroccan security forces. The pine trees, planted in symmetrical lines, sprout chest-high making long-range visibility nearly impossible. As an additional measure, many of the camps employ dogs to alert the migrants to the arrival of the police. Well-worn paths crisscross the forest and the first campsite is little more than a ten minute walk from the city. Poloff, guided by Diacharis Poudiougou, a Malian doctoral student, and Amadou Dialli, a Guinean student, visited the camps in August to meet the migrants and see their conditions first hand.

RUDIMENTARY LIVING AND POLICE RAIDS

16. (SBU) Nigerians are the largest nationality present in the forests, but poloff also met with Malians, Burkinabes, Guineans, Cameroonians and Congolese. Their living conditions are rudimentary and rough. Plastic bottles, used to carry water from the city, and small metal pots for cooking over open fires are strewn alongside the accumulated litter of human living. Their makeshift shelters, constructed of tree branches with a plastic tarp for

cover and bedding underneath, offer minimal protection in the winter months when the temperature fluctuates between 4 and 8 degrees Celsius. In addition to the forest, a couple hundred migrants have taken up residence squatting within the campus of the Mohammed I University of Oujda. These migrants, who tend to be rougher and more aggressive than those in the forest, are afforded a degree of protection since the security forces are reticent to enter the university grounds during daytime hours in order to avoid provoking the students by their presence.

17. (SBU) The police make raids every three to four months into the forest and university campus, typically in the early hours of the morning. They try to capture those they can though most migrants, alerted to their arrival, disappear deeper into the forest. The security forces then ransack and burn the campsites and makeshift tents. Poloff observed scorched rock, melted plastic and rubbish scattered throughout the forest providing plentiful evidence of numerous old campsites burned to the ground. Poudiougou contacted poloff to report that on September 8, police conducted an early morning raid of the campus and forest areas in which they arrested eight migrants and destroyed the campsites.

NUMBERS OF MIGRANTS

18. (SBU) The total number of sub-Saharan migrants in Morocco is difficult to know with any accuracy. A study commissioned by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimated that there are approximately 10,000 to 30,000 illegal sub-Saharan migrants in Morocco at any given time. The total number of migrants in Oujda, according to estimates by local NGOs, fluctuates between 1,200 and 2,000 and has reportedly increased in recent years. Poudiougou estimated there are nearly 350 people living in the forest visited by poloff. He also

noted that there is another forest campsite with an additional 300 people nearby, and a transit camp near the Algerian border known as "smelly waters" with another 150-200 migrants. The university campus area houses approximately 120, though this group is among the most visible concentration of migrants. Although sub-Saharanans are the clear majority, the NGO Association Beni Znassen for Culture, Development and Solidarity (ABCDS) reported there have also been cases of migrants entering from Algeria originating from Bangladesh, Syria, the Philippines, India, and Pakistan.

THE ROUTE TO MOROCCO

¶9. (SBU) The majority of migrants enter Morocco after having travelled a well-worn overland path that includes a stop in Gao in Mali for those coming from the western part of Africa and Agadez in Niger for more southern origins. In Algeria the main route takes migrants through the town of Tamanghasset (REF A) and on to Ghardaia and eventually the border town of Maghnia. The migrants spoke bitterly of the Algerian security forces whom they accused of being more aggressive and violent than their Moroccan counterparts. The Algerians, they conceded, generally allowed them to pass with minimum difficulty knowing that their final destination is Morocco. The border area between Oujda is relatively porous and smuggled goods help sustain the local economy (REF B). Migrants reported that it is relatively easy to arrange transport and most pay between 50 and 100 euros.

AND ON TO SPAIN

¶10. (SBU) Once safely ensconced in the forests, the migrants typically look to pool their money and form groups of ten or more people and to make contact with a smuggler. The fee depends on the means of transport but averages between 2,000 to 4,000 euros. Most opt for a sea crossing in "pateras" or small wooden boats launched from numerous small beaches on Morocco's Mediterranean coastline. Others try to be smuggled across the border hidden in secret compartments and among the freight of a car or truck through the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla. Since 2000, the Spanish government has installed a sophisticated command and control system called the Integrated System of External Vigilance (SIVE) which consists of numerous radars and infrared cameras to track and intercept approaching ships. The success of SIVE on the Andalusian coastline and the Canary Islands has made it even more difficult for the migrants to arrive undetected. Despite the risks of getting caught, the migrants persist because they know firsthand the stories of people who have successfully made the passage.

EXPULSIONS: THE PING PONG POLICY

¶11. (SBU) Just as Oujda is the principal entry point for migrants, it is also the main point used by the GOM to expel migrants from Morocco. While migrants detained in Western Sahara are expelled into Mauritania, all others are bussed to Oujda, consolidated at the commissary jail, and expelled to Algeria. According to reports by migrants and NGOs, once the GOM has collected a sufficient number of prisoners, approximately twenty to thirty people, the migrants are driven to a Gendarmerie outpost near the Algerian border at nightfall. They are then

stripped of any valuables, typically cellular phones and whatever petty cash they might have on their person, and instructed to walk into the desert in the direction of the Algerian border. The Algerian border guards are generally aware of the expulsions by the Moroccan forces and they wait on the other side to discourage the migrants from reentering Algeria. Trapped in a no man's land that stretches for several kilometers, the migrants invariably turn around and walk back to Oujda by following the power lines. Poloff spoke to a migrant who said he had returned that morning to the forest. He had walked for two days to return to the forest after being expelled at the border. Many of the migrants poloff spoke with shared a similar story.

¶12. (SBU) The NGOs and migrants reported that women and children were also sent out into the desert without protection or supplies. Juliet, a young Nigerian woman, told poloff that she was expelled to the border area during the winter of early 2009 along with a group of people that included a woman who had recently given birth. It was very cold, she recounted, and the child died from exposure on the return journey.

¶13. (SBU) Some of the migrants claimed that the women were separated from the men and sexually assaulted by the security forces before being expelled. While NGOs in Oujda expressed skepticism that the security forces engage in systematic rape of the migrants, they recounted that in 2006 there was a well-publicized incident of rape. The migrants also confirmed, though none had first hand experience, the existence of roving criminal gangs and smugglers that operate within the no man's land of the border area and prey on migrants by robbing them of any remaining valuables and raping the women.

MOTIVATIONS TO MIGRATE AND IMPEDIMENTS TO RETURN

¶14. (SBU) In spite of the many hardships and dangers they face, the migrants continue to come, motivated by the simple fact that every week dozens of their compatriots successfully make the passage to Europe. The migrants told poloff that just one week before his visit 23 people, including four women, made it undetected to the Spanish coast. Even those who have previously failed are determined to make it across no matter the cost or effort. A Nigerian man, Francis, told poloff that he paid 3,200 Euro to be smuggled across the border hidden among produce on the back of a truck entering the Spanish enclave of Ceuta. He was discovered at the border, brought to Oujda, and expelled to the Algerian border. He returned to the forest outside of Oujda because in his own words, "I have no other choice." Another Nigerian, Friday, told poloff that he spent nearly five years working in Madrid illegally before he was discovered and deported back home. He made the overland journey across Africa for the second time and is now biding his time in the forest waiting for the next opportunity to cross.

¶15. (SBU) The migrants repeatedly spoke in terms of absolutes and used words like "honor" and "shame" when discussing the imperative to reach Europe. Most told of selling family land or possessions in order to finance the trip and indicated that their extended family is depending on the success of their reaching Spain. One man simply said, "I would rather die than fail."

TRAFFICKING: CONCERNS AND REALITIES

¶16. (SBU) NGOs say there is little evidence that the migrants are victims of traffickers. Rather, the vast majority of migrants move of their own volition. Anecdotal evidence indicates that many of the migrant women engage in prostitution to make a living and some, especially in Rabat and Casablanca, have fallen into conditions of forced prostitution by criminal gangs. On the Moroccan side there is no mechanism in place to identify trafficking victims or make an asylum claim prior to expulsion.

¶17. (SBU) COMMENT: Morocco faces many challenges trying to cope with the influx of illegal migrants that can only be met by cooperating with its neighbors and regional allies. Instead of fostering these partnerships, the GOM has engaged in a policy of forced expulsions which raise serious human rights concerns. There is solid empirical evidence that the number of African migrants to Morocco has increased since 2000 and will likely continue in the future. UNHCR (see septel) and some NGOs have urged the GOM to take control of the migration challenges it faces by adopting clear refugee and asylum adjudication procedures -- which would represent a crucial first step toward a policy that balances security and humanitarian concerns.

ORDONEZ